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Teaching religion in a plural world

R.Ruard Ganzevoort

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ABSTRACT

As a theologian working in Western Europe, religious plurality is unavoidable for me. It seems that our context can no longer be identified in terms of secularization. Competing worldviews and complementing religious stories dictate the religious landscape (and increasingly so, due to migration and global communication). The religions present in my country, however, are not monolithic and stable systems. Within these religions we find more and more different religious views, behaviors, and experiences. Religion is more and more deinstitutionalized: individual attitudes and religious styles have become dominant at the expense of church structures and traditional doctrines.

This situation raises important questions for theology and education, aiming at a contribution to peace, dialogue, and reconciliation. One issue regards the aims and vocation of the theologian/educator and the relation between his or her faith and professional duties or intentions. One can opt for a detached teaching about religious points of view, for a committed teaching from a religious point of view, or for a dialogical teaching between religious points of view. The implications of these options will be explored.

Another is the issue of religious identity that we seek to develop and support in students and the question what type of religious identity is desirable in a context of deinstitutionalized and plural religion. If religion is seen as the way we deal with transcendence, then religious identity should always be open-ended. In that sense, a pluralist environment can be seen as a stimulus for religious education.

INTRODUCTION

How does Christian higher education bridge gaps between competing cultures or worldviews? That is the question governing this track of the program, and I feel privileged to add my views to that discussion. As context is essential to any argument, I will start by saying that I come from a Western-European, more

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specifically Dutch background. You may know that The Netherlands is sometimes referred to as the most secularized country in the world, and that is relatively true. Everything depends of course on the definitions used. If we follow the most recent World Values Studies (1999-2004) and look at self-report as a religious person, we find that the Dutch rank 52 on a list of 70 countries with still 61.4 % responding affirmatively.¹ On the question how important God is in the person's life, the Dutch score 5 on a ten points scale, which places them on a low position 72 out of 84 countries. When we ask whether participants belong to a religious denomination, the Netherlands couples with Japan, China, Estonia, and Czech Republic as the only countries where non-members outnumber members. On the most recent national poll, 36 % call themselves members, and of the members, only 38 % is a regular churchgoer (Becker & De Hart 2006). And in our own study of students of education in Christian professional universities, only 13 % said religion plays a role in their lives. All in all, it is safe to say that my country is not particularly religious.

That lack of religion, however, is not the only thing to be said. An index for religious homogeneity, viewed from a Christian perspective, shows that 59 out of 72 countries have some kind of religious monoculture. The Netherlands are one of the few countries where major traditions are in balance with other Christian and non-Christian groups. The number of Muslim believers is around 3 % but still growing. Moreover, some 5 % of the Dutch population consists of Christian migrants that belong to Roman Catholic parishes or form independent congregations with a strong ethnic background (Euser, et al. 2006). And finally, there is some adherence to alternative religious traditions, although this is rather limited.

The picture is thus much more complex than simply secularization. That is even more the case when we look beyond the statistics and ask what religion means to people and how it relates to their lives. Then we find among church members a wide diversity of religious experiences, beliefs, and practices. Some of these are supported or indeed prescribed by the church they belong to. Others are officially incompatible with a Christian conviction, but are nevertheless found among Christians.

I am not claiming that this is a unique phenomenon for the Netherlands. On the contrary: in many countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin and South America we will find examples of the like. My point is that this has not often been

¹ European Values Study Group and World Values Survey Association. EUROPEAN AND WORLD VALUES SURVEYS FOUR-WAVE INTEGRATED DATA FILE, 1981-2004, v.20060423, 2006. Aggregate File Producers: Análisis Sociológicos Económicos y Políticos (ASEP) and JD Systems (JDS), Madrid, Spain/Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands. Data File Suppliers: Análisis Sociológicos Económicos y Políticos (ASEP) and JD Systems (JDS), Madrid, Spain/Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands/ Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung (ZA), Cologne, Germany; Aggregate File Distributors: Análisis Sociológicos Económicos y Políticos (ASEP) and JD Systems (JDS), Madrid, Spain/Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands/Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung (ZA) Cologne, Germany.

accounted for in our theological thinking on pluralism. When theologians speak of pluralism and interreligious dialogue, they usually refer to competing worldviews or practices on the societal level and encounters between official representatives of the world religions. It also happens between churches and the media, to name but one new arena for dialogue. My claim will be that every classroom in the Netherlands, even in a Christian school is religiously pluralistic; indeed that many people are engaged in an interreligious *dialogue intérieur*. I will first discuss the concept of deinstitutionalization as an alternative to secularization theories, and relate deinstitutionalization with religious pluralism on different levels. The second part of my paper will deal with the development of religious identity in a plural context and with the implications for education.

DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION

Until recently, the religious context of western countries was usually described with concepts like secularization. Because of processes of modernity, rationalization, and individualization, religion would lose its role as a sacred canopy, an overarching frame of reference. According to sociologists like Casanova (1994), this entails three different elements. First differentiation, the increasing distinction between the different domains of life, like labour, family, leisure, consumption, politics, and so on. In all these domains, religion is no longer the fundamental dimension that holds everything together. Instead it has become but one subsystem among many. Second reduction, not only in terms of church membership and religious activity, but much more in terms of a desacralization of the world. The domain of the sacred loses ground to the rational and the secular. This process of desacralization is not alien to Christianity but has actually been stimulated by it, especially by Protestantism. Third privatization, in which religion recoils into the private sphere and plays a much smaller role in the public domain. These three processes have been observed in many countries, especially but not only in the western world. In every country a unique constellation of these three processes is found.

More recently, the monopoly of the secularization theory has waned. Some sociologists nowadays claim that we live in a time of desecularization and especially deprivatization (Berger, et al. 1999, Casanova 1994). Religion has become more important in societies, but it is less clearly connected to traditional religious institutions like churches and mosks. Instead we find a strong religious impetus from commercial sources, the media, popular culture, and so on. To call that desecularization would miss the fact that religion is not reinstated as the ground for all existence, but remains one isolated domain of life. Secularization is a continuing phenomenon, but it is complemented by other tendencies. Desecularization and deprivatization can be observed as well, but not as if the processes are simply reversed.

The common factor in both secularization and desecularization is the diminution of the impact of religious institutions. That was the case in secularization, but it is a prominent feature of desecularization as well. When religion plays an increasing role in present day society, it is not necessarily the church or the school that embodies this role of religion. Cinema, pop music, commercials, schools, political parties, and new spiritual groups have taken the seat that was left vacant. Both processes thus are part of the larger phenomenon of deinstitutionalization, which regards religion, but also for example politics and labor unions. In a consumerist society, people will use what they need from whatever source, and form their own bricolage.

The concept of deinstitutionalization thus captures both secularization and desecularization. It is a concept directly connected to institutionalization and reinstitutionalization. The nucleus of religion is not sought in this institutional dimension, important as that is, but in the human devotion, the individual and collective relations with the sacred. Through the ages and in different contexts, this devotion has been institutionalized in various structures and organizations, and these structures have eroded in other times. Religious traditions can thus be seen as the processes of taming this lived religion or 'wild devotion' as some call it. By taming the devotion, the anarchistic tendency of human devotion is curbed, and checks and balances are applied that turn religion into a social force that sustains society (Ganzevoort 2006).

In the process of deinstitutionalization, devotion is withdrawn from the powers of the institutions. A direct consequence of that is an increasing pluralism. When every individual creates his or her own religion, blending traditional elements of the institutionalized religion with material from other sources, the result will never be completely identical. This can be called a form of inculturation of the Christian faith, but it happens at the level of individuals and groups inasmuch as it happens at the level of societies. In the process of developing one's religion, these individual factors become more important than the institutional ones. Pluralism thus results from deinstitutionalization, but at the same time it stimulates deinstitutionalization: if one's context is pluralized, it is more difficult to reserve all plausibility for only one religious institution.

But let me go even one step further. This understanding of deinstitutionalization and the accompanying religious pluralism is not only found on the level of societies, groups, and between individuals. It is also found within the individual religious identity. At least in our context, persons develop their own personal religion and use material from very different sources. This personal religion is then given shape in the context of a wide variety of mutually exclusive life domains. The direct consequence of this is that many people do not form a consistent monolithic religious identity, but a patchwork construction of bits and pieces. If we ask people about their religious affiliation, they may still answer in terms of the official tradition to which they belong, but that does not mean that they follow the teachings of the church and organize their lives accordingly. Roman Catholics may distance themselves from the moral teachings of Rome and

Protestant churchgoers may be active in alternative healing practices like Reiki or practice Zen-meditation.

EDUCATION AND IDENTITY

My point is this. If we ask ourselves how Christian higher education can bridge gaps between competing cultures or worldviews, then we should address this issue at all the levels of pluralism. Competing cultures or worldviews are found at the level of society, but they are also found in the classroom and within the individual student. Even if we teach in a relatively homogeneous population, we encounter a plethora of views and practices that call for an interreligious dialogue. Even when in individual coaching or pastoral counseling we work with a person, an interreligious *dialogue intérieur*. The various voices of the self compete and converse with one another like in a polyphonic novel (Ganzevoort 1999). They represent different truth claims, and we try to bring these together in an effort to build an inhabitable world. To achieve that, it is not adequate to look for consensus or harmony; we need to explore the conflicts much deeper.

At this point, it is useful to discuss three types of teaching religion as models for education in a pluralist world. I will apply these models not only to the level of society and classroom, but also to the intrapersonal plurality. One can opt for a committed teaching from a religious point of view, for a detached teaching about religious points of view, or for a dialogical teaching between religious points of view. These types are called kerygmatic, liberal, and communicative-communitarian respectively (Altena & Hermans 2002). The kerygmatic type is usually located in a context that is thought to be monoreligious (Sterkens 2001). One religious tradition is dominant, and the pedagogic aim is the internalization of that tradition. The normative basis is the truth claim of this one religious tradition. This type does not really acknowledge plurality, but lives on the assumption of an absolute revealed truth. When other religions are taken into account, it is as competing or indeed misleading traditions. On the individual level, it regards those religious convictions that don't leave room for variance. Alternative viewpoints are automatically seen as dangerous and therefore to be rejected.

The liberal type is located in a multireligious context. It takes its starting point in the conviction that intrinsically all religious traditions are equally valuable. Detached from a particular tradition, the educator aims at providing knowledge about the various religious options. The normative basis is religious relativism. On the individual level, this type allows conflicting parts of one's religious identity to function alongside each other without being integrated, or even without being contrasted with one another. This model is in fact dominant in the Netherlands, but in recent years it has lost much of its appeal. Instead of creating the promised harmony and mutual understanding, it yielded indifference and lack of communication. In a society of increasing interreligious tension, this type proved unable to address the strong religious motivations that people may have.

The communicative-communitarian type focuses on an interreligious dialogue. This is no detached observer's point of view, nor a monolithic defense of the faith. Instead, the aim is to develop competence in dialogue (Vroom 2006). Plurality is taken as the starting point and considered to be an opportunity for mutual enrichment. Here the educator works with the religious plurality in the classroom, and the coach or counselor tries to bring out the competing views and practices rather than harmonize them. Conflicts are seen as the possibility for growth for all and an enrichment of the particulars of each tradition. That means that each participant is challenged to deepen the existential involvement with his or her own religious tradition. On the intra-individual level, it means that we do not harmonize the different religious views or practices in our own live, but instead highlight their contrasts because there we will be invited to enter into a real dialogue that demands us to take seriously the various perspectives and engage with a particular Christian perspective ourselves. Between the monolithic self and the multiple personality, this type supports the polyphonic self.

In my opinion, teaching religion in a plural world should take this third approach. Neither the proselytizing dogmatics of the monoreligious model, nor the neutralizing liberalism of the multireligious model does justice to plurality and to the meaning of religion. In the interreligious dialogical model, we accept and strengthen the religious commitment of each participant, we highlight the differences as well as the parallels, and we seek forms of accommodating each other in order to build a peaceful society. But this should not only take place on group level. Bridging gaps should start in the individual. To function in an interreligious, plural world, we have to acknowledge the plurality within ourselves.

That is not just a pragmatic consideration. It has to do with the nature of a religious identity. Practical theologian Henning Luther (1992) has claimed that the idea of a fixed and stable identity is misleading. It can only be achieved if we renounce grief over what we have lost in the past, hope for what might come in the future, and the pain and joy of meeting other persons. True identity, Luther states, should be an open identity. This is all the more the case when it comes to religious identity. To build a fixed identity would then mean to renounce transcendence. Such a strong identity may include a clear commitment to convictions and norms of a specific tradition, but that is more fundamentalism than religiosity. Open religious identity builds on receptivity, transcendence, and the awareness that God can meet us every day in a new way (Ganzevoort 2004).

CONCLUSION

As a theologian and educator, I take my starting point in the plural world that students and I live in. It is this plural world that also lives in our own hearts. We have to come to grips with this plurality instead of seeing it as a fundamental threat to our religion. Learning to live with plurality is not opposed to developing a religious identity. On the contrary, it may help us to rediscover the open nature of a religious identity.

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